



**NAVAJO NATION OFFICE OF THE
PRESIDENT AND VICE PRESIDENT
RUSSELL BEGAYE | JONATHAN NEZ**

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CONTACT: Navajo Nation Press Shop
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BEGAYE REQUESTS FEMA PRELIMINARY DAMAGE ASSESSMENT

Window Rock – President Russell Begaye yesterday formally requested a Preliminary Damage Assessment (PDA) from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in response to the Gold King Mine spill. A Preliminary Damage Assessment is the first step in the application process for public assistance for recovery from a disaster for eligible applicants.

“The spill caused damage to the water quality of the San Juan River to such a massive extent that a state of emergency was declared by the Navajo Nation,” wrote President Begaye in a letter to EPA Associate Administrator Elizabeth Zimmerman. “All of the economic, health, cultural and other impacts to the Navajo people are not yet known. Given the significance of the San Juan River to the health, welfare economy, and culture of our Nation and people, the Navajo Nation, as a federally recognized Indian tribe, officially and specifically requests a mission assignment for Technical Assistance to complete a Preliminary Damage Assessment for damages as sustained as a result of the Gold King Mine spill.”

Last month, FEMA rejected the Navajo Nation’s request for the appointment of a disaster-recovery coordinator to direct the federal government’s response to the crisis. During his testimony before Congress following the decision, President Begaye called on the federal government, and specially FEMA, to provide greater support to address the disaster caused by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) spill.

CLICK [HERE](#) FOR FULL LETTER TO FEMA

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THE NAVAJO NATION

RUSSELL BEGAYE PRESIDENT
JONATHAN NEZ VICE PRESIDENT

October 01, 2015

Elizabeth A. Zimmerman
Associate Administrator
Office of Response and Recovery
Federal Emergency Management Agency
500 C Street SW
Washington, DC 20472

Through: Robert J. Fenton
Regional Administrator
Region IX
1100 Broadway, Suite 1200
Oakland, CA 94607.

Subject: REQUEST FOR PRELIMINARY DAMAGE ASSESSMENT

Dear Ms. Zimmerman,

On Wednesday, August 5, 2015, the United States Environmental Protection Agency was conducting work at the Gold King Mine in Silverton, Colorado that led to a rupture resulting in the release of an estimated 3 million gallons of toxic mine waste into Cement Creek and its tributaries, the Animas River and the San Juan River (the "River"). The River runs along approximately 250 miles of the northern border of the Navajo Nation.

The spill caused damage to the water quality of the River to such a massive extent that a state of emergency was declared by the Navajo Nation on Saturday, August 8, 2015, a mere day after the Nation learned of the spill and a day after the President established an Incident Command to respond to the spill; Declaration of Emergency, Navajo Nation Office of the President and Vice-President. *See Enclosure A.* The Navajo Nation Commission on Emergency Management also declared a state of emergency on Sunday, August 9, 2015; Declaration of Emergency, Navajo Nation Commission on Emergency Management. *See Enclosure B.* The Navajo Nation Department of Emergency Management within the Navajo Nation Division of Public Safety activated the Navajo Emergency Operation Center that same day (August 9).

The primary uses of the San Juan River by the Navajo Nation include water for human use, irrigation for farms, water for livestock, and recreational uses, among others. Farming and ranching are the backbone of our culture and economy, and are both heavily dependent on the San Juan River. Indeed, in our arid region with little water distribution infrastructure in place, our farmers rely heavily on the San Juan River and ditch irrigation practices to keep their fields hydrated and their crops growing. Our farmers mostly live on their farmlands and consume their crops as a matter of subsistence. These families have lost a significant portion of a full growing season's worth of work. The Navajo Nation already faces a daunting unemployment rate of 42 percent. Along the San Juan River, many of our people have been able to make a life for themselves and support their families through farming and ranching. Their livelihoods as well as their growing cycles and field rotations have been disrupted. Farmers who are used to producing their own farm goods will now need to buy fruits and vegetables for themselves, and hay and alfalfa for their livestock, to replace what was lost. Our farmers will also lose income from the expected sales that did not or will not occur. Even farmers who have been able to salvage their farm goods now face a stigma developing with respect to fruits and vegetables grown along the San Juan River.

We also have significant concerns regarding the health impacts of the spill. Heavy metals like lead, arsenic and others that were discharged during the spill are known to be dangerous to humans, animals, and plants. These metals persist in the environment and are particularly harmful to fetuses and children. To provide a sense of the magnitude of exposure to these harmful metals just from the spill, one report of EPA data indicated that lead was found near the Cement Creek/Animas River confluence "at more than 200 times higher than the acute exposure limit for aquatic life, and 3,580 times higher than federal standards for human drinking water." And arsenic was found "more than 24 times the exposure limit for fish and 823 times the level for human ingestion."¹ Human consumption of farm products and livestock raised on contaminated water is therefore of grave concern. Although USEPA has stated that surface water has returned to its previous condition, we are concerned that many of the contaminants have merely settled to the bed of the River, and will be resuspended in our San Juan River water later, such as during storm events.

The Nation's impacts are felt most pointedly in the disruption of our cultural principle of *hozho*, which encompasses beauty, order, and harmony, and expresses the idea of striving to maintain balance in the Navajo universe. We connect to our land, our water, and each other through ceremonies and gatherings. We grow four types of corn, each used for a specific purpose in our ceremonies, and those seeds are protected by the strong culture of farming that has persisted in the San Juan River Basin. Navajo cornhusks are mixed with tobacco to create ceremonial smoke,

¹ <http://m.startribune.com/nation/321518301.html>

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and our corn pollen is used as an essential element in all Navajo ceremonies. One of our corn seed strains is utilized in our critical *kinaalda* ceremonies (the coming of age ceremonies for our women). We also grow an array of heirloom fruits and vegetables that our people eagerly anticipate selling and purchasing during our popular fair season each fall. Those fruits and vegetables are shared over family tables, and are a part of the cultural glue that keeps our families and way of life intact. Families travel for hours across the Nation to the San Juan River Basin to access these ingredients for our ceremonies and celebrations. But the spill destroyed many of these crops so critical to our prayers, ceremonies, and our way of life.


The impairment of the River and the adverse impacts to our farmers and ranchers, and our community as a whole, will mark a moment of community trauma that will be endured for years to come. This new trauma will compound our already significant historical trauma, and raises new and troubling public health concerns. Already four suicides have occurred in affected communities along the River. Our Department of Health is researching the connection of the suicides to the spill, and we are concerned that these might be the first of a larger cluster. Indeed, two additional suicides have occurred in an area south of the affected area, resulting in a total of six post-spill suicides on the Nation. This tragedy affects all of our Nation because so many of us have relatives in Northern Navajo. We will be dealing with the effects of this spill for decades and rebuilding the shattered sense of self so many of our people are experiencing as a result of this disaster.

All of the economic, health, cultural, and other impacts to the Navajo people are not yet known. Given the significance of the San Juan River to the health, welfare, economy, and culture of our Nation and people, the Navajo Nation, as a federally recognized Indian tribe, officially and specifically requests a mission assignment for Technical Assistance to complete a Preliminary Damage Assessment for damages sustained as a direct result of the Gold King Mine spill.

If you have any further questions or need clarification regarding this letter, please contact Ms. Rosalita Whitehair at our Emergency Operations Center at (505) 371-8415/8416/8417. We look forward to your favorable decision.

Sincerely,

THE NAVAJO NATION


Russell Begaye, President

FEMA

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Enclosures:

*Enclosure A Navajo Nation Office of the President and Vice-President Declaration of
Emergency as it relates to the Gold King Mine Spill.*

*Enclosure B Navajo Nation Commission on Emergency Management Declaration of
Emergency as it relates to the Gold King Mine Spill.*